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FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SCER SITS AT THE CENTER OF ELECTORAL SPAT

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. While publicly the GPC and JMP continue to dig deeper into their entrenched positions regarding the upcoming parliamentary elections, officials on each side have left open the possibility of reaching a face-saving compromise that would encourage JMP participation. The GPC-dominated SCER began voter registration with a bang, sparking violent protests in the South and heightening fears that even a three-month delay in the elections might not smooth over long-running tensions. END SUMMARY.

A PUBLIC BATTLE

¶2. (C) Recently, General People's Congress (GPC) officials have maintained a "show must go on" attitude regarding the April 2009 parliamentary elections. On November 10, Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Rashad al-Alimi said, "The elections must be carried out as constitutionally prescribed. It's actually to (the GPC's) advantage to delay the elections, but we are subject to the law and constitution." In a November 11 meeting, contacts at the National Democratic Institute (NDI) reported debate within the GPC regarding the elections; while some national security "hawks" insist that the elections must happen on time to maintain stability, the party's "doves" are willing to consider a delay to enable Joint Meeting Parties' (JMP) participation.

¶3. (C) On November 11, the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum (SCER) deployed 33,000 field commissioners to update voter registration lists nation-wide. But violent protests against the electoral commissions occurred in some southern governorates. Security forces opened fire on protestors on several occasions, with at least one fatality, a teenager in Lahj. Newspapers also reported an early morning explosion and small-arms fire targeting electoral commission headquarters in the city of Ja'ar in Dhale governorate. SCER member Ja'afer Basaleh assured PolOff on November 11 that 95% of the local committees were "functioning."

¶4. (C) Sultan Hizam al-Atwany, the current JMP chair and Secretary General of the Nasserite Party, told Pol/E Chief on November 15 that the "minimum guarantees" for JMP participation were a parliamentary vote on certain electoral amendments, reformation of the SCER and a number of other items, including the annulment of all SCER actions undertaken since August 18. Al-Atwany confirmed that the JMP was calling on members to boycott the elections, saying, "We will not support a totalitarian system under the cover of decorative democracy."

PRIVATE TALKS

¶5. (C) Behind closed doors, negotiations between the two sides continue. The latest ruling party proposal included the addition of two JMP members to the SCER and a parliamentary vote on an unspecified number of electoral amendments. Although each side blamed the other for its unwillingness to compromise, officials expressed limited optimism. According to al-Alimi, "The President has said that the door remains open to coordinate with the opposition parties." In a November 15 meeting, al-Atwani sighed, "They (the GPC) do

whatever they want and don't give consideration to others' demands. But we still hope they will reform." Mohammed Abulahoum, head of the GPC's foreign relations department, was also cautiously hopeful about the prospect for compromise throughout a November 15 meeting.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) Competitive, multi-party elections are the best option for sustaining Yemen's fragile democracy. If a compromise can be reached and JMP participation ensured, a short delay would not be a significant setback. In light of the violence that has already flared up in Yemen's historically disenfranchised southern regions, the road to the elections is still very uncertain, and even a political compromise might not be sufficient to reduce street-level tensions. END COMMENT.

SECHE